



## Lebanon

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions. The country's confessionally-based political system merges various political and religious interests, with occasional consequences that can be interpreted as either political or religious discrimination.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period. There is no state religion; however, discrimination based on religion is built into the system of government. The Government appoints and pays the salaries of Muslim and Druze judges, as the judicial system is historically part of the state apparatus. Groups that do not enjoy official recognition, such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and unregistered Protestant Christian groups, can be disadvantaged under the law.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were periodic reports of friction between religious groups, which may be attributed to political or religious differences, and citizens still struggled with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought largely along religious lines. The 2005 parliamentary elections brought out political tensions that arose in many cases along sectarian lines.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 4,035 square miles, and its population is approximately 4 million. Because the matter of parity among confessional groups remains a sensitive political issue, a national census has not been conducted since 1932, before the founding of the modern state. However, the country's leading daily newspaper, *an-Nahar*, published on February 10, 2005, a demographic statistical study which put the relative percentages of approximately 3 million members of the voting public as 26.5 percent Sunni Muslim, 26.2 percent Shi'a Muslim, 40.8 percent Christian (Maronites representing 21.1 percent) and 5.6 percent Druze. There has been a steady decline in the number of Christians as compared to Muslims. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Baha'is, Buddhists, and Hindus.

There are 18 officially recognized religious groups, of which the primary ones are Muslim, Christian, and Druze. The main branches of Islam are Shi'a and Sunni. The smallest Muslim minorities are the Alawites and the Ismaili ("Sevener") Shi'a order. The Maronites are the largest of the Christian groups. They have had a long and continuous association with the Roman Catholic Church but have their own patriarch, liturgy, and customs. The second largest Christian group is the Greek Orthodox Church (composed of ethnic Arabs who maintain a Greek-language liturgy). Other Christians are divided among Greek Catholics, Armenian Orthodox (Gregorians), Armenian Catholics, Syrian Orthodox (Jacobites), Syrian Catholics, Assyrians (Nestorians), Chaldeans, Copts, evangelicals (including Protestant groups such as the Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and Friends), and Latins (Roman Catholic). The Druze, who refer to themselves as *al-Muwahhideen*, or "Unitarians," are concentrated in rural, mountainous areas east and south of Beirut. Divisions and rivalries between groups date back many centuries, and while relationships between religious adherents of different confessions are generally amicable, group identity is highly significant for all aspects of life.

There are a number of foreign missionaries operating in the country, primarily from Catholic and evangelical Christian churches.

Many persons fleeing alleged religious mistreatment and discrimination in neighboring states reside in the country, including Kurds, Shi'a, and Chaldeans from Iraq, and Coptic Christians from Egypt and Sudan.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### *Legal/Policy Framework*

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there

are some restrictions. The Constitution provides for the free exercise of all religious rites with the caveat that public order not be disturbed. The Constitution also provides that the personal status and religious interests of citizens be respected. The Government permits recognized religions to exercise authority over matters pertaining to personal status such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. The "Twelve" Shi'a, Sunni, Christian, and Druze each have state-appointed clerical bodies to administer family and personal status law through their own religious courts, which the Government subsidizes. There is no state religion; however, politics are based on the principle of religious representation, which has been applied to nearly all aspects of public life. The unwritten "National Pact" of 1943 stipulates that the President, the Prime Minister, and the Speaker of Parliament be a Maronite Christian, a Sunni Muslim, and a Shi'a Muslim, respectively. The 1989 Taif Accord, which ended the country's 15-year civil war, reaffirmed this arrangement but resulted in increased Muslim representation in Parliament and reduced the power of the Maronite President.

The following religious holy days are considered national holidays: New Year, Armenian Christmas, Eid al-Adha, St. Maroun Day, the Muslim New Year, Ashura, Good Friday, Easter (for both Western and Eastern rites), the Birth of the Prophet, All Saints' Day, Feast of the Assumption, Eid al-Fitr, and Christmas. Also, the Government excuses from work public sector employees of the Armenian churches on St. Vartan Day.

State recognition is a legal requirement for religious groups to conduct certain religious practices. A group that seeks official recognition must submit its dogma and moral principles for government review to ensure that such principles do not contradict popular values and the Constitution. The group must ensure that the number of its adherents is sufficient to maintain its continuity.

Alternatively, religious groups may apply to obtain recognition through existing religious groups. Official recognition conveys certain benefits, such as tax-exempt status and the right to apply the religion's codes to personal status matters. An individual may change religions if the head of the religious group the person wishes to join approves of this change.

Citizens belonging to a faith not recognized by the Government are permitted to perform their religious rites freely; however, their political rights are not secured. For example, a Baha'i cannot run for Parliament because there is not a seat allocated for this confession, neither can he/she secure a senior position in the Government as these are also allocated on a confessional basis. However, a number of religious faiths are recorded under the existing recognized religions. For example, most Baha'i are registered under the Shi'a sect, and thus Baha'i can run for office to fill a seat allocated to the Shi'a sect. Similarly, Mormons are registered under the Greek Orthodox faith. Decisions on granting official recognition of religious groups do not appear to be arbitrary; in recent years, the Government has recognized such groups as the Alawites and the Copts.

The Government allows private religious education. In 2002, Muslim and Christian clergy finalized a set of unified religious education material to be used in public schools; however, the materials have not yet been included in school curricula.

The Government permits publishing of religious materials in different languages.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding by supporting a committee on Islamic-Christian dialogue, which is co-chaired by a Muslim and a Christian, and includes representatives of the major religious groups. Leading religious figures who promote Islamic-Christian dialogue and ecumenism are encouraged to visit and are received by government officials at the highest levels. Clerics play a leading role in many ecumenical movements worldwide. For example, the Armenian Orthodox Patriarch, Aram I, is the moderator for the World Council of Churches. The Imam Musa Sadr Foundation also has played a role in fostering the ecumenical message of Musa Sadr, a Shi'a cleric who disappeared in Libya in 1978. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization funded a \$10,000 project for the publication of a book on Christian-Islamic understanding in the country. The book was authored by 16 Muslim and Christian scholars and has been available on the local market since 2002.

#### *Restrictions on Religious Freedom*

The 1989 Taif Accord called for the ultimate abolition of political sectarianism in favor of "expertise and competence;" however, little substantive progress has been made in this regard. Christians and Muslims are represented equally in Parliament, the Cabinet, and first category civil service positions, which include the ranks of Secretary General and Director General. One notable exception is the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which, through universal conscription and an emphasis on professionalism, has significantly reduced the role of confessionalism in that organization. Seats in Parliament and the Cabinet, and posts in the civil service, are distributed proportionally among the 18 recognized religious groups.

Officially unrecognized groups such as Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, and some evangelical denominations may own property and assemble for worship without government interference; however, they are disadvantaged under the law because legally they may not marry, divorce, or inherit in the country. Protestant evangelical churches are required to register with the Evangelical Synod, which represents those churches to the Government. The Synod is a nongovernmental advisory body representing Protestant churches in the country. It is self-governing and oversees religious issues for the congregations. Representatives of some churches have complained that the Synod has refused to accept new members since 1975, thereby crippling their clergy's ability to minister to communities in accordance with their beliefs.

In February 2004, the Government denied a residency permit to the nonresident leader of a local Pentecostal community, who was in Lebanon on a visitor's visa, and granted him seven days to depart the country. The Government informed him he must

register as a religious worker in order to re-apply for a residency permit. He left the country as ordered, but has been unable to return. He claimed he could not fulfill this requirement of registering as a religious worker because the head of the Evangelical Synod refused to register his congregation.

In October 2004, the Minister of Labor ordered shops in the coastal city of Sidon to close on Fridays at the request of the predominantly Muslim Merchants' Association of Sidon.

Many families have relatives who belong to different religious communities, and intermarriage is not uncommon; however, intermarriage may be difficult to arrange in practice between members of some groups because there are no procedures for civil marriage. However, the Government recognizes civil ceremonies performed outside the country.

There are no legal barriers to proselytizing; however, traditional attitudes and edicts of the clerical establishment strongly discourage such activity. The clerical establishments are appointed by the religious authorities to which they are affiliated. The nomination of the Sunni and Shi'a Muftis is officially endorsed by the Council of Ministers, and they receive monthly salaries from the Government.

The Government does not require citizens' religious affiliations to be indicated on their passports; however, the Government requires that religious affiliation be encoded on national identity cards.

Religious groups administer their own family and personal status laws. Many of these laws discriminate against women. For example, Sunni inheritance law provides a son twice the inheritance of a daughter. Although Muslim men may divorce easily, Muslim women may do so only with the concurrence of their husbands.

In 2003, the Cabinet endorsed a draft law allowing the country to adopt a curriculum proposed by the Islamic Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization making Islamic culture the core of the educational curriculum at all levels in schools and universities. Following strong condemnation and opposition from a spectrum of Christian figures, including the head of the Maronite Church, the Shi'ite Speaker of Parliament argued that the bill in its spirit violated the Constitution. The Government subsequently withdrew the bill.

Article 473 of the Penal Code stipulates that one who "blasphemes God publicly" may face imprisonment for up to 1 year. There were no prosecutions reported under this law during the reporting period.

Students and teachers functioning on tourist visas are deemed to have violated their visa status and are consequently deported. The same sanction applies to religious workers not working under the auspices of a Lebanon-registered organization.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees during the reporting period.

#### *Forced Religious Conversion*

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### *Abuses by Terrorist Organizations*

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

#### *Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom*

In October, the outgoing Minister of Education yielded to years of pressure from Muslim leaders and ordered the closure of public schools on Fridays, the Muslim day of prayer. The decree stipulated that if students, teachers, and the neighborhood religious authority agreed, a local public school could continue to operate on Fridays and close over the Saturday-Sunday weekend, which Christians generally prefer. The result of the decree was respect for Muslim sensibilities in those neighborhoods where Muslims are the majority.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were periodic reports of friction between religious groups, which may be attributed to political or religious differences, and citizens still struggle with the legacy of a 15-year civil war fought largely along religious lines. Religious and political leaderships generally have maintained amicable relations in spite of their political differences. During the reporting period, there was intense sectarian rhetoric and the detonations of five bombs in commercial areas of predominantly Christian neighborhoods in the run-up to parliamentary elections. Leaders of all religious denominations condemned the bombings. Most of the issues at stake concern political or development issues and each party or confession seeks to mobilize as much popular support as possible to obtain its goals.

In the months of March through May, in the run-up to the parliamentary elections, sectarian rhetoric steadily increased, culminating in a statement by the Maronite Bishops' Council which implied that Muslim voters should not have a deciding voice in the election of Christian candidates. The statement by the Bishops' Council, as well as other politically motivated rhetoric, exacerbated sectarian tensions.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no incidents of violence against religious persons.

In 2003, a bomb exploded outside the home of a Western Christian missionary in Tripoli killing one person.

The Government has kept open its investigation into the 2002 bombing of a mosque and shrine in the town of Anjar. The shrine is estimated to date back 800 years and was a popular pilgrimage site for Sunni Muslims. Local Muslim clerics severely criticized the attack, which occurred as Muslims prepared for the Eid al-Fitr feast marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan.

Similarly, a permanent search warrant remained in effect in the 2002 murder of an American citizen missionary affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Evangelical Alliance in Sidon, although the case was officially closed in April 2004. Investigations at the time of the murder suggested that Sunni extremists, possibly operating from the nearby Ain al-Hilweh Palestinian refugee camp, were responsible.

In 2002, Ahmad Mansur, a Muslim employee at the teachers fund office, shot and killed eight of his colleagues, of whom seven were Christian. Mansur claimed that he committed the crime for confessional reasons. Mansur was arrested and in April 2003 the judicial tribunal (Supreme Court) sentenced him to death. The sentence was carried out on January 17, 2004.

In 1999, Sunni extremists killed four LAF soldiers in an ambush in the northern region of Dinniyah after the soldiers attempted to arrest two Sunni Muslims allegedly involved in a series of church bombings. The LAF retaliated by launching a massive military operation against Sunni extremists in the north. In 2002, some of the suspects who had been arrested went on a hunger strike for a few days to protest trial delays and seek improvements in their detention conditions. The suspects were detained without trial or conviction until July 2005 when they were amnestied by parliament along with a long-jailed Christian leader.

The Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel's occupation of South Lebanon nurtured a strong intolerance for Israelis, and the country's media sometimes referred to the State of Israel as "the Jewish State" to avoid referring explicitly to Israel. During the reporting period, Hizballah, through its media outlets, regularly directed strong rhetoric against Israel and its Jewish population and characterized events in the region as part of a "Zionist conspiracy."

In 2003, Hizballah's Al-Manar television aired a Syrian-made anti-Semitic mini-drama it advertised as portraying the history of the Zionist movement. The station aired the series "Al-Shatat" ("The Diaspora") in daily segments during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan when television audiences peak.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy advances that goal through contacts at all levels of society, public remarks, embassy public affairs programs, and funding of projects. Embassy officers meet periodically with leaders of religious communities and discuss with them issues related to religious freedom and tolerance. The Embassy complained to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Information about the airing of anti-Semitic programs by Al-Manar television. The Ambassador raised with the head of the Surete Generale, the agency responsible for all immigration issues, the visa status of several Christian missionaries who had been advised to depart the country and regularize their visa status. The Surete Generale claimed this action was based solely on better enforcement of visa regulations, which it has been doing since the events of September 11, 2001. However, some Christian leaders believe that the denials were a reaction to the lack of supervision by local sponsors of the American missionary killed in Sidon in 2002. The United States supports the principles of the Taif Accord and embassy staff regularly discusses the issue of sectarianism with political, religious, and civic leaders.

During Ramadan, senior Embassy officers hosted for the first time in several years Iftar events on the Embassy compound. In 2004, the Embassy sent a member of the Islamic-Christian Dialogue Committee on a Department of State International Visitor Program to participate in an interfaith program in the United States. Embassy staff regularly attended events sponsored by the Committee on Islamic-Christian Dialogue. U.S.-funded programs in rural areas also require civic participation, often involving villages of different religious backgrounds, with the aim of promoting cooperation between religions.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51604.htm)